The Assault on the Universities: Then and Now

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The assault on the university began with the student revolt at the Berkeley campus of the University of California in December 1964. Berkeley was followed by Columbia in 1968, Harvard and Cornell in 1969, and Yale and Kent State in 1970; during this same period some three hundred universities were the scenes of student sit-ins, building takeovers, strikes, riots, and other forms of rebellious behavior. In addition to its violent character, what distinguishes this assault from those of the past is that it came from within the university itself and that it met little resistance from professors and administrators.

The issue at Berkeley, initially at least, was free speech, but free speech had little or nothing to do with the subsequent campus disruptions; here the issues were, or were said to be, university involvement in neighborhood deterioration, in the draft and the Vietnam War, in racism, as well as in university governance, especially in disciplinary matters, and the alleged irrelevance of the curriculum. Except for the neighborhood issue (so prominent at Columbia), all these figured in the events at Cornell, which, under pressure from gun-bearing students, proceeded to jettison every vestige of academic integrity. In this respect the Cornell of the sixties became the prototype of the university as we know it today.

Shortly after he was installed as Cornell's president in 1963, James A. Perkins formed a Committee on Special Educa-

tional Projects charged with recruiting black students whose SAT scores were substantially below (as it turned out, 175 points below) the average of Cornell's entering class. Subsequently it was revealed that many of these students were to be recruited from the slums of the central cities, and perhaps not surprisingly, they proved incapable of being, or were unwilling to be, integrated into or assimilated by the Cornell student body; assimilation, they said, threatened their identity and needs as blacks.

In 1966 they formed an Afro-American Society, which in short order demanded separate living quarters, an Afro-American studies program—and seized a university building to house it—and ultimately an autonomous degree-granting college. To justify it, they issued a statement saying that "whites can make no contribution to Black Studies except in an advisory, non-decision making or financial capacity" and therefore that the program must be developed and taught by blacks and, as it turned out, only to black students.

This demand for an autonomous, degree-granting college took the form of an ultimatum, to which President Perkins responded by saying that he was "extremely reluctant to accept this idea of a college exclusive to one race, but [that he was] not finally opposed to it; it would involve a lot of rearranging of [his] own personality."* To head this college, or as it came to be known, this Center for Afro-American Studies, the university, without the consent of the faculty, hired a twenty-eight-year-old graduate student in sociology at Northwestern University who, despite repeated requests, failed to submit a statement explaining the center's purpose and operation. (The closest thing to a statement of purpose came from the Afro-American Society, which said that the aim of the center "would be to create the tools necessary for the formation of a black nation.") To teach the first course in the program

*In the event, and, as those who knew him had come to expect, his "personality" needed no rearrangement. As he said after the guns had brought him to his knees, "there is nothing I have ever said or will ever say that is forever fixed or will not be modified by changed circumstances."

(on "black ideology"), the university, over the objection of two (and only two) faculty members of the appropriate committee, hired a twenty-four-year-old SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) organizer who had completed a mere two years of college.

This jettisoning of academic standards, respecting the courses to be taught and the faculty to teach them, was largely the work of various members of the administration, only one of whom (the vice provost) was honest enough to admit that it was being done under pressure from the Afro-American Society—but, he assured the few dissenting members of the faculty, "it would never be done again." To refuse to accommodate the black "moderates," he said, would only strengthen the hands of the "militants."

Within a few months these "moderates" were burning buildings; joining with the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) to barricade Chase Manhattan bank recruiters; removing furniture from a women's dorm and placing it in a building taken over by the Afro-American Society; disrupting traffic; overturning vending machines; trashing the library; grabbing President Perkins and pulling him from a podium (and, when the head of the campus police rushed to Perkins's aid, driving him off with a two-by-four); harassing campus visitors with toy guns; and, at five or six o'clock of a cold morning, seizing the student union building, driving visiting (and shivering) parents from their bedrooms—it was Parents Weekend—out into the street. Justification for this seizure was said to be the burning of a cross on the lawn of a black women's dorm, which, the university now implicitly admits, was done by the "moderate" blacks themselves. They then brought guns—real, not toy, guns—into the student union and, two days later, at gunpoint, forced the university to rescind the mild (very mild) punishment imposed on the blacks found guilty of these various offenses by the student-faculty Committee on Student Affairs; in effect, they took control of the university. Photographs of the arms-bearing blacks, led by Thomas W. Jones, and of Vice President Steven Muller signing

the surrender document appeared on the covers of the leading national newsmagazines.

All that remained to be done was to get the faculty to agree to the surrender terms, but this proved to be easy. Jones went on the radio to say that Cornell had only "three hours to live" and that the "racist" professors—by which he meant those professors who opposed the surrender—would be "dealt with." (But Cornell's most famous philosophy professor was speaking for the majority of the faculty when he said, "You don't have to intimidate us.") The final act took place at a Nuremberg-like faculty-student rally at which one famous professor after another pledged his allegiance to the new order. As Allan Bloom put it, the students "discovered that pompous teachers who catechized them about academic freedom could, with a little shove, be made into dancing bears."

No one should have been surprised by the faculty's willingness to capitulate to the armed students; the stage had been set for it a year earlier, when black students brought a charge of racism against a visiting professor of economics—he had made the mistake of employing a "Western" standard to judge the economic performance of various African countries—and, not satisfied with the professor's subsequent apology (which the administration required him to make), took possession of the Economics Department office, holding the chairman and the department secretary prisoner for some eighteen hours. The students were never punished, and much to the relief of the dean of the College of Arts and Science, the accused professor left Cornell. On the basis of the findings of a special faculty-student commission, the dean then pronounced the professor innocent of racism but went on to announce that the university and faculty were guilty of "institutional racism" and were obliged to mend their ways.

Nor should anyone have been surprised by the faculty's willingness to "reform" the curriculum, which is to say, to obliterate whatever differences there might still have been between the purposes of higher education and what were perceived to be the immediate, and pressing, concerns of the

world outside. In the years immediately preceding the "crisis," one requirement after another of the old "core curriculum" had been dropped in favor of what can best be called consumer freedom or, in the jargon of the day, of allowing the students "to do their own thing." One of the university's most famous professors, Paul de Man (of whom more later), argued that nothing of value would be lost by doing away with these requirements.

Begun as an assault on university "racism," the Cornell student uprising quickly became an assault on the integrity of the academic enterprise, an assault that was bound to succeed because it was met with only nominal resistance on the part of the faculty and none at all from the administration. Although university rules were broken left and right, the dean of the law school supported the president and voted for peace (to paraphrase Shakespeare's Hamlet, "What was law to him or he to law that he should weep for it?"); at a special meeting of the Arts College (in which, for the first time in its history, students were allowed to participate), the so-called humanists confessed their sins and called upon the president to do what he was not legally entitled to do—namely, nullify all the penalties imposed on black students "since the beginning of [the] spring term"; and the natural scientists, in the spirit of "better them than us," confident that none of it would reach the doors of their laboratories, remained aloof from the battle.[1] On the whole, just as George Orwell's Winston Smith came finally to love Big Brother, so the typical Cornell professor came to admire the student radicals and sought their approval. From his perspective, theirs was the only moral game in town.

The black students, while threatening the lives of named members of the faculty, claimed to be putting "their [own] lives on the line"; others, inspired by Cornell's resident priest, Father Daniel Berrigan,[2] insisted that they had "the moral right to engage in civil disobedience" and proceeded ceremoniously to burn their draft cards; the SDS, the vanguard of the New Left, led the assault on the "irrelevant" curriculum, insisting that the university could not remain disengaged from the great

moral issues, war, racism, and the rank injustice of "bourgeois society." The largely bourgeois faculty agreed, thereby demonstrating that Andy Warhol was right when he said that "nothing is more bourgeois than to be afraid to look bourgeois."

With the faculty acquiescent and the students either triumphant or confused, Perkins had only to deal with the university trustees. They had been willing to fund the black studies program with a million dollars and had remained quiet when Perkins placed the university airplane at the disposal of black students, enabling them to go to New York City to purchase, with two thousand dollars in university funds, a set of bongo drums for Malcolm X Day. The one thing they could not abide was negative publicity—could not abide and, as it turned out, could not prevent. Covering the Cornell story for the *New York Times* was a Pulitzer Prize war reporter, Homer Bigart, who had learned to distrust official press releases, in this case those issuing from Muller's public relations office. Bigart's stories provided *Times* readers with a vivid account of what was in fact going on at Cornell, and when, despite Perkins's efforts to have it suppressed, the *Times* eventually ran on its front page a particularly damaging story, summarizing the events (the *Cornell Alumni News,* a publication with forty thousand subscribers and over which Perkins and Muller had no control, hurried into print with its own damaging account), the trustees called for Perkins's resignation, or according to the story handed out, he chose to resign.

But Perkins and his friends survived, their reputations (at least in some circles) unblemished. Muller became president of Johns Hopkins University; in 1993 Thomas Jones, the erstwhile black revolutionist, having been named president of TIAA-CREF (Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association—College Retirement Equities Fund, the world's largest pension fund), was appointed to the Cornell Board of Trustees, and in 1992, by way of recognizing "his outstanding leadership and extraordinary contributions to [the] University," Cornell established the James A. Perkins Professorship of Environ-

mental Studies. In 1995 Jones "made a large contribution to the University," enabling it to endow an annual Perkins Prize of five thousand dollars "for the student, faculty, staff member or program that has done the most during the preceding year to promote interracial understanding and harmony on campus."

To say the least, not everyone thought Perkins deserved this recognition—Bayard Rustin, the great civil rights leader, called him "a masochistic and pusillanimous university president"[3]—but even his critics would have to admit that Perkins left his mark on the university, and not only on Cornell. By surrendering to students armed with guns, he made it easier for those who came after him to surrender to students armed only with epithets ("racists," "sexists," "elitists," "homophobes"); by inaugurating a black studies program, Perkins paved the way for Latino studies programs, women's studies programs, and multicultural studies programs; by failing to support a professor's freedom to teach, he paved the way for speech codes and political correctness; and of course he pioneered the practice of affirmative action admissions and hiring. In a word, while it would exaggerate his influence to hold him responsible for subsequent developments, he did provide an example that other institutions found it convenient to follow. For evidence of this, consider these news items, culled from four months of the *Chronicle of Higher Education:*

- Bates College students protest admissions policy; student body only 8 percent minority; dean of admissions agrees with protesters (April 13, 1994).
- Cornell trustees approve a Latino Living Center and studies program after Hispanic students occupy administration building and block off sections of the campus (April 30, 1994).
- Under student pressure, University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee) is likely to approve gay and lesbian studies program (April 30, 1994).
- Howard University asks Yale Professor David Brion Davis (Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, for his

studies of slavery) to cancel his lecture because of anti-Semitic atmosphere on campus (May 4, 1994).

- Vassar College found by U.S. district court to have discriminated by denying tenure to a woman; judge found that her scholarship record was far superior to that of three men who received tenure (June 1, 1994).
- University of Oregon requires all students to take two courses meeting the "Race, Gender, Non-European American Requirement" (June 15, 1994).
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, cites eighty-six colleges for violating rights of disabled, forty-four for sexual bias, forty-four for racial and ethnic bias, and one for age bias (June 22, 1994).
- Northeastern University accords gays and lesbians preferential treatment in hiring (June 29, 1994).
- National Endowment for the Humanities funds summer institute with $320,000 to help professors and administrators think about how diversity and democracy "should be dealt with in the classroom" (June 29, 1994).
- University of Wisconsin requires all students to take course in ethnic studies (June 29, 1994).
- Under pressure from U.S. Department of Education, University of Missouri will triple black enrollment by granting scholarship aid, despite low test scores or "marginal grades," to all but handful (July 13, 1994).
- University of Michigan criticized for failure to hire sufficient number of black and Hispanic professors (July 13, 1994).
- Georgetown Law School admits, then rejects white student who, on application form, checked box marked "Black/A.A." (July 20, 1994).

When Perkins assumed the presidency of the university in 1963, there were only 25 black students at Cornell (out of a total of about 11,000). Too few to be segregated, these 25 lived in the same dormitories and received the same education as the other students. By the time of Perkins's departure in 1969,

there were 250 black students on campus, but with their own self-segregated living quarters and their own studies program.

What was true then remains true today, and not merely at Cornell. Blacks are a visible presence on every campus, but on every one I know or know about, so are the racial divisions. For example, black and white students at the University of Pennsylvania "tend to live in separate dormitories, beginning with the freshman year; they eat in separate portions of the dining hall; they belong to different clubs and campus organizations."[4] The only thing they seem to have in common, beyond their status as students in the University of Pennsylvania, is the desire to live apart from each other. This is not as the university would have it. On the contrary, it would prefer (or, at least, claims to prefer) an integrated student body, one where students associate regardless of race, sex, religion, national origin, or "sexual orientation"; such differences are supposed to be irrelevant, and on most campuses probably are irrelevant.

But there is one difference that is not irrelevant and the effects of which cannot be ignored, especially in a university: a difference in aptitude (or whatever it is that is measured by the SAT). Aptitude is directly, and predictably, related to success or failure in the university (and, since birds of a feather tend to flock together, at least indirectly related to campus social relations), and because the SAT is a reasonably reliable measure of it, there is no denying that the difference between white and black students is huge. At Penn, the mean SAT score (verbal and math) of the whites is 150 points higher than that of the blacks; translated into centiles, the SAT score of the average black student is about equal to the SAT score of the tenth percentile of white students. This means that 90 percent of the whites and 50 percent of the blacks are above that point (whatever it is), and 10 percent of the whites and 50 percent of the blacks are below it. What is true at Penn is true at the other so-called elite institutions—but less so at those that are able to attract the best black students—and to judge from the data from the universities of Virginia and California, the

gap between blacks and whites may be even greater in the state universities.

In effect, as was the case at Cornell in the sixties, affirmative action means admitting students from different worlds, students with different capacities, interests, and habits, students who have little in common but, if left to their own devices, might be expected to live together peaceably even if separately; like members of the general public (65 percent of whom now approve of interracial dating, for example), students have come to be tolerant of differences. Unfortunately they are not left to their own devices; instead Penn subjects them to a steady drumbeat of propaganda—the students describe it as political indoctrination—urging them to be "sensitive and accepting of difference," the consequence of which, as the students themselves admit, is a campus "obsessed, mesmerized, driven by an unceasing battle between the various racial, ethnic, and sexual groups."

This indoctrination begins with freshman orientation, when in separate programs black students are told, to put it simply, that the University of Pennsylvania is a racist institution, with a racist curriculum, a racist faculty and student body, and the whites in turn are harangued about their alleged racism.[5] Thus, as soon as they set foot on campus, students are informed, in effect warned, that depending on their race, they will be treated differently and unequally, and so they are, and so are professors.

The white student who shouts, "Shut up, you water buffalo," is charged with racial harassment, but the black students who steal and then destroy an entire press run of the student newspaper are not even reprimanded; the white Jewish professor who refers to himself and black students as "former slaves" is suspended for a semester without pay and is required to attend "sensitivity and racial awareness sessions," but the black professor who in public calls him an "asshole" is made head of the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture and is named to the search committee charged with finding a new president to replace the man who had presided over

these events, Sheldon Hackney, who in turn is named chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities by President Clinton.*

The situation at Penn is similar to that at Cornell in 1969 and, although not everywhere to the same extent, similar to that on most campuses today. Political correctness follows on affirmative action, and it is not at all clear that even its intended beneficiaries, to say nothing of the benefiting institutions, are the better off because of it. Many more black students are enrolled, but despite grade inflation, their dropout rate greatly exceeds that of white students. What effect this has on their pride, or, as we say today, their "self-esteem," is difficult to calculate but not to imagine. The university encourages them to attribute their difficulties to white racism, but the honest among them know this not to be the case. Even those who would have been admitted without it are forced to bear the stigma attached to affirmative action; they can never be sure they are not perceived by their white fellow students as the beneficiaries of racial preference. No one, especially no one otherwise qualified, likes it to be thought he is being admitted *because* he is black (or is being hired or promoted to tenure rank *because* she is a woman), but where affirmative action is the rule it is not easy to overcome the suspicion that this may indeed be the case. The highly qualified Susan Estrich, the first woman in ninety years to serve as president of the *Harvard Law Review,* said she did not know "a successful woman or minority who hasn't somewhere along the way, faced the assumption that they *[sic]* didn't quite deserve what they *[sic]* earned." As she put it, "We who are supposed to be its beneficiaries also pay the price of affirmative action."[6]

To say the least, these programs are of little use to the

*Informed of the newspaper theft, Hackney said that "two important values, diversity and open expression, appear to be in conflict." That "conflict" was resolved as Perkins would have resolved it. Instead of punishing the students who stole the newspapers, the university punished the campus police who apprehended them. According to the official report of the university's Judicial Inquiry Office, the police should have known that they were dealing with "a form of student protest [and not] criminal behavior."

blacks, they breed cynicism among the whites, and they have a corrupting effect on the institutions, but even if (as now seems likely) they are no longer to be required by the federal government, we are not likely to see the end of them in the private colleges and universities. They were initiated at Cornell and elsewhere because they were thought to be a way of alleviating a social problem, but they are retained probably because they make their champions feel good. They allow them to exhibit their compassion, and compassion, when detached from its religious foundations, is one way of expiating guilt. (Hence the limousine liberal.) Compassion is also accompanied—not always but frequently—by a sense of superiority; the healthy or wealthy one feels superior to the other who is sick or poor, because it is the other who is suffering and the one who can provide relief. Sympathy therefore, especially when one acts on it, is satisfying; it makes one feel good. As Clifford Orwin writes, "this is what lends credence to the Hobbesian view that sympathy is merely self-concern on vacation."[7]

Affirmative action for blacks was intended ultimately to bridge the economic and social gap between the races, but nothing similar to this can be said about women's studies courses, which, by somebody's count, now number in the tens of thousands. The more radical among them—Christina Sommers calls them "gender feminist courses"—can have no other purpose but to teach women to hate or despise men, and in the process they threaten to transform the university into a sort of boot camp for culture warriors.[8]

Unaware that it takes two to tango, even the moderate programs proceed on the assumption that women can be studied apart from men and have as their purpose to divide the sexes, not to bring them together. Yet there are few, if any, university presidents (still largely men) who object to the establishment of these programs. Like James Perkins before them, they apparently see no reason, or are too weak, to object, or perhaps they pretend ignorance of what is being taught in them.[9] Whatever the explanation, the situation brings to mind Tocqueville's prediction of what we can expect at the

end of the women's project—namely, "weak men and disorderly women."[10]

Although a legacy of the sixties, affirmative action—for women or even for blacks—was not the principal cause for which the students took to the barricades in those turbulent times. True, they accused the universities of racism (as well as complicity in the draft and Vietnam War), but like their counterparts in France and Germany—remember Rudi Dutschke?—they fancied themselves part of a mass movement against the "repressive system" or the "technological culture" being imposed on them by the universities. According to the chroniclers of the Berkeley "rebellion," the students of the sixties were searching for "authentic values" and could not find them in the courses available to them.[11] The same complaints were heard at Cornell (as well as at Columbia, Harvard, Yale, and the rest), where students paraded as New Left "revolutionists," all the while expressing their contempt for "bourgeois society."*

The antibourgeois sloganizing, so popular, so easy at the time, was mostly cant, as Richard Nixon demonstrated when he put an end to the draft and, with it, the so-called student movement. The radical students of the sixties may have hated bourgeois society (and despised its representatives), but having no clear idea of what to put in its place, they abandoned politics for the drugs and sex of Woodstock. They should find the university much more to their liking today.

For the others, the sort of student who took no part in the sixties' rebellions, the universities continue their bourgeois ways. According to a recent report, more than 50 percent of the baccalaureate degrees now being awarded in our colleges and universities are in those most bourgeois of subjects: engi-

*The students took as their models Mao Zedong, Castro, and Che Guevara, but they might just as well have taken someone from Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. I proved this when, to an American government class at the height of the Cornell crisis, I read some speeches analyzing the situation and calling for what ought to be done. The radicals in the class were enthusiastic until I revealed that the speeches were by Mussolini.

neering, business, and other professional programs (excluding education).

There is of course nothing despicable about learning how to make a living; on the contrary, providing for oneself (and for one's family) is, as Tocqueville points out, one of the things that distinguishes a free man from a slave.[12] But the radical students were justified in thinking that vocational training is not the proper business of the university. Americans have never had to be encouraged to look after the practical side of things; they do that for themselves. As Tocqueville said, "people living in a democratic age are quite certain to bring the industrial side of science to perfection anyhow," which is to say, without being encouraged to do so. This explains why the taxpayers and alumni who pay the piper are disposed to call an industrial or vocational tune. Yet, perhaps uncharacteristically, they continue to support the universities even though so much of vocational training—basic economics, business, accounting, computer science, and the like—could be provided at less than half the cost by the community colleges. (Less than 18 percent of Maryland's higher education budget is allocated to community colleges, even though they enroll 57 percent of the state's undergraduates.) They probably support the universities because they think it important that students—even prospective engineers, bankers, lawyers, doctors, accountants, and the like—should have some acquaintance with the humanities, or, as they might say (but with only the vaguest idea of what they mean by it), with "culture." Before contributing to the annual fund drives, however, they would do well to learn how these "culture" courses are being taught these days.

Although not the first to define the term as it is used in this context, Thomas Carlyle (in the 1860s) spoke of culture as the body of arts and learning separate from the "work" or "business" of society. This definition has the merit of reflecting (and that very clearly) the problem that gave rise to the culture movement in the nineteenth century. Carlyle was preceded by Coleridge, Keats, and Wordsworth (who, in his role as poet,

saw himself as an "upholder of culture" in a world that had come to disdain it); by Shelley (who said that society could do without John Locke "but not without Dante, Petrarch, Chaucer, Shakespeare"); and by John Stuart Mill, for whom culture meant the qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity or those aspects of humanity that he, like Tocqueville, foresaw might be absent in a utilitarian or commercial society. Carlyle was followed by Matthew Arnold, for whom culture meant not only literary pursuits but—in a sentence that became familiar, if not famous—the pursuit of "the best which has been thought and said in the world."[13]

These critics and poets had a concern for the sublime (or the aesthetic) and a complaint against the modern commercial and bourgeois society in which the sublime, they feared, would have no firm place. The philosophical founders of this new society—particularly John Locke and Adam Smith—promised to provide for the needs of the body (and in this they surely succeeded); culture was intended to provide for the needs of the soul. Coleridge made this the business of his "clerisy," an official body—originally (as in the case of the Church of England) but not necessarily a religious corporation—set apart and publicly endowed for the cultivation and diffusion of knowledge. America assigned this task to the universities.

Of course no American university, or at least no public university, can ignore the task Jefferson assigned to the University of Virginia, that of paying "especial attention to the principles of government which shall be inculcated therein." He believed that students have to be prepared to live in a free society, to know what is required of citizens in that society. But one of the things required of them is to criticize it, for example, to call it to account for its racism or, as Coleridge and Company were doing in the nineteenth century, for its failure to inculcate respect for "the best which has been thought and said in the world." Unable, for constitutional reasons, to establish a clerisy, we assigned this task to the universities and, more precisely, to their humanities faculties. Unfortunately, as Allan Bloom wrote, "the humanities are now failing,

not for want of support but for want of anything to say."[14] Or, as he might have said, what the humanities are now saying is a sophisticated version of what the radical students used to say.

Shortly after Bloom published *The Closing of the American Mind,* a trenchant account of the state of the humanities in this country, and especially in the universities, the American Council of Learned Societies assembled a group of distinguished humanities professors and charged them with writing a response to it. Their report acknowledges the book's "disturbingly popular" success but insists that the attacks on the humanities (by Lynne Cheney and William Bennett, as well as by Bloom) "would be comic in their incongruity if they were not taken so seriously by so many people, with such potentially dangerous consequences." It goes on to say that "such attacks mislead the public [and] give students quite the wrong impression about what the humanities are doing." Contrary to what the critics are alleged to be saying, students are reading the great books (or, as the report puts it by way of casting doubt on their greatness, the "great books"), but they have "to learn to think about them in ways that do not suppress the challenges of contemporary modes of analysis."[15] But in making that statement about the humanities having nothing to say, Bloom was referring to deconstructionism, the most prominent of those "contemporary modes of analysis," the mode of analysis then favored by—to quote the ACLS report—"the best scholars in the humanities today."

Deconstructionism was brought to America by the Belgian-born Paul de Man (among others). When de Man died in 1983, Yale (where he had been teaching after leaving Cornell) is said to have gone into mourning, and President A. Bartlett Giamatti declared that "a tremendous light for humane life and learning is gone and nothing for us will ever be the same." Giamatti himself was soon to resign and become, first, president of the National Baseball League and then baseball commissioner (neither one the most humane of vocations), but

there is little doubt that in his eulogy of de Man he was speaking for the Yale literary faculties and, indeed, for the Modern Language Association, the governing body of contemporary humanities. When, in 1986, J. Hillis Miller became president of the MLA, he said, "the future of literary studies depends on maintaining and developing that rhetorical reading which is today called 'deconstruction.' " What, then, is deconstructionism?

An answer to this question is not easy to come by. As one might expect, there is a vast secondary literature on the subject, but when one leaves aside the polemical and therefore unreliable attacks written by its enemies, most of it is either unintelligible or (at least for someone not schooled in contemporary literary theory) incomprehensible. Consider the following passage from the pen of a Cornell professor of history:

> De Man's very understanding of language in his later works made dispossession, trauma, and mourning constitutive features of the linguistic process itself, and his continual critique of an "aesthetic ideology" of totalization, organicism, full rootedness, and the elimination of difference—in brief, the illusory realization of the imaginary—may in certain limited and problematic ways be read as applicable to the assumptions of the Nazi movement. I would also note that the undoing of the binary oppositions, while perhaps more marked in Derrida than in de Man, has been a crucial aspect of deconstruction in general and is very important for the critique of a scapegoat mechanism that resists internal alterity, is intolerant of mixed or hybridized forms, and requires a fixed, pure, and decisive divide between the integral self and the other.[16]

Any translation of this passage, indeed, any attempt to explicate its obscurity, would violate one of the principles of decon-

structionism; obscurity is supposed to be a sign of profundity and, as such, is preferred over clarity.[17] Thus to attempt to give a coherent account of deconstructionism requires one, like it or not, to enter a bizarre world where meaning is meaningless, where "all interpretation is misinterpretation," where words have no referents, where (to bring this to an end) a dog is not a kind of barking animal but a "concept."

As explained by de Man himself, deconstructionism is a way of reading that claims to be superior to other modes of literary criticism because it is more cognizant of the problem of language and, therefore, of reading. "De Man," according to Geoffrey Hartman, one of his most devoted partisans, "always asks us to look beyond natural experience or its mimesis [its imitation or representation in a work of art or literature] to a specifically linguistic dilemma," and that dilemma derives from our inability to control "the relation between meaning and language." The fact that it does not, and cannot, convey meaning in any objective sense is, de Man says, "the distinctive curse of all language." A "text" does not convey its author's meaning; it has its own "textuality," independent of the author. A work of literature cannot be "reduced to a finite meaning, or set of meanings," which means that the critic's task is not to elucidate but to interpret; in a way, the critic's interpretative skills are more important than the work (or "text") being read. "And since interpretation is nothing but the possibility of error, by claiming that a certain degree of blindness is part of the specificity of literature we also reaffirm the absolute dependence of the interpretation on the text and of the text on the interpretation."[18] In effect there is no meaning, there is only interpretation—or as Gertrude Stein said of Oakland, "there's no there there"—and the more idiosyncratic, the better. Like some other modern critics, deconstructionists treat a work of literature the way a figure skater treats ice: as a surface from which to launch their linguistic versions of camels, toe loops, and double axels. Put otherwise, criticism is exalted over literature, or readers over authors, and according to one deconstructionist, whereas the history of criticism used

to be part of the history of literature, "now the history of literature is part of the history of criticism."[19]

As explained by Hartman (quoting de Man), "The fields of critical philosophy, literary theory, and history have an interlinguistic, not an extralinguistic, correlative; they are secondary in relation to the original, which is itself a previous text. They reveal an essential failure of disarticulation, which was already there in the original. They kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead. They read the original from the perspective of pure language *[reine Sprache]*, a language that would be entirely free of the illusion of meaning."[20] Translated, this means that what is written by the critic is related ("interlinguistically") to the work being criticized, but neither the work nor the criticism is related to anything in the world outside language. Language is not about anything except other language. This is true of a Shakespeare play, a Wordsworth poem, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, or a popular potboiler. As one deconstructionist admitted, even newspapers and almanacs can be deconstructed.

To say that nothing written has an "extralinguistic correlative" means that nothing written refers to, or is related to, anything existing outside the "text". It means that love, friendship, and fidelity; envy and jealousy; justice, injustice, slavery, tyranny, and tolerance; natural rights and constitutional wrongs, all the things written about by poets, playwrights, philosophers, historians, statesmen, and founders are merely words, words without correlatives other than other words. It means—here I quote Roger Kimball—that "the atrocities we read about are merely literary phenomena, referring not to the sufferings of real people, real 'originals,' but only to a 'previous text'!"[21] It means that neither Matthew Arnold nor anyone else can speak of "the best which has been thought or said in the world" because there is no basis for such judgments, no basis for criticism. There is nothing outside the text, and above all, as Allan Bloom put it, there is nothing higher. "This," he said, "is the final step in making modern

man satisfied with himself."[22] The only thing the humanities can say to him is what the students were saying in the sixties: "Do your own thing."

Deconstructionism had its critics in the academy, but it ceased to be the reining mode of critical analysis for another reason. It was discredited largely because de Man was discredited. In 1987 it was revealed (first in the pages of the *New York Times*) that he had been a Nazi collaborationist during the German occupation of Belgium, having written 170 articles for the French-language *Le Soir* and ten others in *Het Vlaamsche Land,* a Flemish-language daily.[23] What is of interest here, because it speaks volumes about the condition of the contemporary university, is how the academy responded to these revelations.

De Man had made no mention of his Nazi connections when he came to the United States in May 1948, and it is easy to understand why. His benefactor, novelist and critic Mary McCarthy, and his academic colleagues, first at Bard College, then at Harvard, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Cornell, and Yale, could not have been expected to welcome him had they known of his Nazi connections. Communism is one thing, but being pro-Nazi, then and now, puts one beyond the pale. And although many of the leading figures in the fields of comparative literature and literary theory were to deny it, some of them to excuse it as a product of youthful innocence, de Man had been pro-Nazi and, so long as the Germans were winning the war, had made no effort to conceal it. On the contrary, he had openly expressed his admiration of Hitler, had supported his war and his program; like Hitler, he had looked forward to a Europe without Jews.

He addressed the Jewish question in a *Le Soir* article of March 4, 1941, entitled "Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle" (the Jews in contemporary literature), at the end of which he proposed his own version of Hitler's "Final Solution." Modern literature, he wrote, has not been "polluted" by Jewish influence because Jewish writers, especially in France, have

always been second-rate, but the Jews were at least partly responsible for the decadence of European political life. Thus, by their being banished to a "Jewish colony, isolated from Europe," the political problem could be solved without any "deplorable consequences for Western literary life." Banishing writers of only "medicore value" would have the additional benefit of allowing Western literature to continue to develop or evolve "according to its own laws."[24]

In the October 28, 1941, edition of *Le Soir* he, like the notorious Martin Heidegger, rejected any attempt to distinguish between Germany and Hitlerism. Their similarity, or "closeness," he wrote, was evident from the beginning, and the war would only make it clearer that Hitler spoke for Germany; the war would unite "the Hitlerian soul and the German soul, making them into a single and unique power." He said this "is an important phenomenon because it means that one cannot judge the fact of Hitler without at the same time judging the fact of Germany, and that the future of Europe can be foreseen only within the framework of the possibilities and needs of the German spirit. It is not a question of a series of reforms, but, rather, of the definitive or final emancipation of a people who, in turn, are called upon to exercise a hegemony in Europe."[25] Question: From whom or what were the German people (and after them the people of Europe) to be emancipated?

In his essay "On the Jewish Question," Karl Marx had argued that the "emancipation of mankind from *Judaism*" depended on the "emancipation of the Jews" from Judaism, or as he put it in the last line of the essay, "the social emancipation of the Jew is the *emancipation* of society from *Judaism*." It might be said that Marx was one of the first to think actively about a solution to the "Jewish question" or, as it came to be called, the "Jewish problem," but as he was later to say, mankind poses for itself only such tasks as it can solve, and because he thought that at the time mankind had no solution in hand, he was content to wait until the Jews ceased to be Jews. Not being content to wait for that to happen, Hitler devised a

solution, and in his own way so did Paul de Man.

As might have been expected, these revelations of his Nazi sympathies created a public scandal, but not among his academic admirers. The charges against him were said to be "groundless" (Rodolphe Gasché); the fact that his "writings during the occupation contain certain disturbing statements and positions with no parallel in his other writings before or after the occupation makes it difficult to read his newspaper articles as straightforward expressions of deeply held beliefs" (Ian Balfour); it is impossible to "understand what this allusion to 'a Jewish colony isolated from Europe' meant at that moment" (Jacques Derrida); "although [de Man] grants the maximum attention to the role that Germany or 'German genius' has played or ought to play in the destiny of Europe, although he recalls constantly the necessity of understanding thoroughly the history of the German nation in order to understand Hitlerism, although he is vigilantly opposed to the commonplace and the 'lazy and widespread solution' that comes down to 'supposing an integral dualism between Germany, on the one hand, and Hitlerism on the other [and] although his analysis leads him to judge German 'hegemony' in Europe to be ineluctable, this diagnosis seems rather cold and far removed from exhortation" (Jacques Derrida); "De Man's 'dirty secret' was the dirty secret of a good part of civilized Europe. In the light of what we now know, however, his [later] work appears more and more as a deepening reflection on the rhetoric of totalitarianism" (Geoffrey Hartman); "we are not now, and, in all likelihood, shall never be . . . in the position of being able to pass judgment on Paul de Man" (Leon Roudiez); de Man's so-called "collaborationist" journalism was "simply a job" (Fredric Jameson).[26]

Not content simply to defend de Man, his friends and intellectual neighbors proceeded to subject his academic critics (and there were many) to a torrent of abuse. To cite only the most extreme example, the Northwestern University professor Andrzej Warminski accused them of not being able to read, of deliberate misrepresentation, of "stupidity," of being

sick, of being philistines, of being primarily committed to "the institution and institutional values and criteria," which, they thought, were being threatened by de Man and "anyone with intellectual values (which, by the mere fact of *being* intellectual values always represent a potential threat to the institution and its creatures)." But, he went on, even this was not enough to explain the "hysteria" provoked by the revelations. "What could make so many of these creatures crawl out from under the rocks of their pathologies?" To this he attached the following footnote: "Anyone who thinks that the reptilian figure here is exaggerated should read some of the slime that has passed for [academic] 'journalism' these last months."[27] One might well ask what it was that caused him to crawl out from under the rocks of *his* pathologies.

But there is a nonpathological explanation for Warminski's anger, if not for the way he expressed it. He and his friends saw the revelations and the ensuing attacks as an attempt by the bourgeois "establishment" to discredit not only Paul de Man but also his way, which was their way, of doing literary criticism. By responding as they did, however, they disclosed the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of deconstructionism, with the result that few literary theorists today are willing to be associated with it.

The assault on the universities, begun by the radical students of the sixties, was continued in a more subtle fashion by the deconstructionists in the eighties. Unlike the students, they did not strike, riot, occupy buildings, or take up arms, nor, as one of the Berrigan brothers was accused of doing—even as he was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize—did they engage in a plot to kidnap Henry Kissenger and blow up the heating system of federal buildings in Washington. (The case ended in a mistrial.) All they did is teach (and teach the next generation of teachers), but what they taught is that the universities have nothing of importance to teach. Matthew Arnold would have had the universities teach the books containing the best that has been thought and said in the world, and Thomas

Jefferson wanted them to teach the Declaration of Independence and *The Federalist,* the "best guides [to the] distinctive principles of the government of the United States." But, according to Paul de Man, there is no best thought and no best guide because there is no text; there is only interpretation. As he said, "the distinctive curse of all language" is that it cannot convey meaning in any objective sense. Thus, about those things that mattered most to Arnold and Jefferson—all the things written about by poets, playwrights, philosophers, historians, statesmen, and founders—the humanities, indeed the universities, would have nothing to say.

In a way this is what the students were complaining about in the sixties: the irrelevance of the curriculum. For some of them the solution was to remake the university into a kind of countercultural welfare agency, and the extent of their success is evident in the prevalence of black studies, women's studies, and multicultural programs. For the others—the ones searching for "authentic values," in which phrase there is, perhaps, a hint of a longing for an education of the sort proposed by Coleridge and Company—what does the university offer? In the humanities it offers a politicized curriculum, the core of which is antirationalist, antihumanist, and antiliberal.

It used to be thought (and in some quarters is still thought) that Shakespeare is the greatest of our poets, the playwright who shows us, for example, the meaning of love and friendship, envy and jealousy, the character of good rulers and the fate of tyrants. In a word, he shows us human beings just as they are, a mixture of the high and the low, or as someone said, "his poetry gives us the eyes to see what is there." The political plays especially meant something for Abraham Lincoln. "Some of Shakespeare's plays I have never read," he said, "while others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are Lear, Richard Third, Henry Eighth, Hamlet, and especially Macbeth. It is wonderful."[28] But for the New Historicism, currently the dominant movement in the field of Shakespeare studies, his plays simply reflect the prejudices of his day. They are said to be

worthy of study only because in them can be found the seeds of racism, sexism, capitalism, classism, all the evils that are said to characterize bourgeois society. Reading Shakespeare in this way has the effect of reducing his stature in the eyes of the students. "Safely entrenched in their politically correct attitude," writes Paul Cantor, a critic of the New Historicism, "students are made to feel superior to Shakespeare, to look down patronizingly at his supposedly limited and biased view of the world."[29]

For the students looking for something "wonderful," for something not available to them in the bourgeois world from which they come and to which they must, willy-nilly, return, these antihumanists have nothing to say.

NOTES

1. The scientists' turn came in 1971, when students blew up the Mathematics Research Center at the University of Wisconsin, killing a postdoctoral fellow and destroying the lifework of five physics professors. Since then science as such has come under attack from feminists, Afrocentrists, and a variety of "postmodernist" professors. For a detailed account of this antiscience campaign, see Paul Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (1994).
2. Berrigan was a campus hero, famous for leading the band of grim ecclesiastics who wrested card files from the hands of the clerk of the Catonsville, Maryland, draft board office and burned them in the parking lot with homemade napalm. When, in a public debate, I asked him whether they had given some thought to the possibility that some harm might come to the defenseless and probably terrified clerk, he replied, "Yes, we gave that *prayerful* consideration, but we decided the protest was so important that we had to run that risk. . . . Besides," he added after a short pause, perhaps recalling that they had not bothered to solicit the clerk's opinion on whether *she* was willing to run that risk, "anyone who works for the draft board deserves no more consideration than the guards at Belsen and Dachau."
3. Bayard Rustin, "The Failure of Black Separatism," *Harper's* (January 1970), p. 30.
4. Richard Bernstein, *Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future* (1994), p. 71.

5. Ibid., pp. 64–65, for a detailed account of this haranguing.
6. Susan Estrich, "Affirmative Action: Politics of Race," *USA Today,* February 23, 1995, p. 11A.
7. Clifford Orwin, "Compassion," *American Scholar* (Summer 1980), p. 323.
8. Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?:* How Women Have Betrayed Women" (Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 28.
9. Students in a women's studies course at Georgetown University are required to read the "SCUM Manifesto," the flavor of which is contained in the following statement: "SCUM [Society for the Cutting Up of Men] is too impatient to hope and wait for the brainwashing of millions of [male] assholes. . . . SCUM will not picket, demonstrate, march or strike to attempt to achieve its ends. Such tactics are for nice, genteel ladies who scrupulously take only such action as is guaranteed to be ineffective. . . . SCUM will kill all men who are not in the Men's Auxiliary of SCUM."
10. *"On peut aisément concevoir qu'en s'efforcant d'égaler ainsi un sexe à l'autre, on les dégrade tous les deux; et que de ce mélange grossier des oeuvres de la nature il ne saurait jamais sortir que des hommes faibles et des femmes déshonnêtes."* Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* vol. 2, book 3, ch. XII, "How the Americans Understand the Equality of the Sexes."
11. Sheldon S. Wolin and John H. Schaar, *The Berkeley Rebellion and Beyond: Essays on Politics and Society in the Technological Society* (1970), p. 40.
12. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* vol. 2, part IV, ch. 6, "What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear."
13. See Carlyle, *Signs of the Times;* Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Culture and Society;* Shelley, *Defence of Poetry;* John Stuart Mill, "Coleridge," and, for a general account, Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (1958).
14. Allan Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs* (1990), p. 293.
15. George Levine et al., "Speaking for the Humanities," *ACLS Occasional Paper,* 7 (1989), pp. 2–3, 14.
16. Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* (1994), p. 114.
17. John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 146–47.
18. Paul de Man, *Blindness & Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971), pp. ix, 11, 141.
19. Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (1988), p. 40. See David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (1991), pp. 262–63.
20. Geoffrey Hartman, "Blindness and Insight," *New Republic* (March 7, 1988), p. 30.
21. Roger Kimball, "Professor Hartman Reconstructs Paul de Man," *New Criterion* (May 1988), pp. 42–43.
22. Bloom, p. 293.
23. *Le Soir* was Belgium's most widely read paper, with a daily circulation of 255,000. After its Belgian owners had fled to France, its name and facilities were taken over by the German authorities. All its articles were censored by the Militärverwaltung's Propaganda Abteilung (the Propaganda Divi-

sion of the Military Administration). The Flemish-language daily, *Het Vlaamsche Land,* was sponsored by the Germans and began publication in January 1941; its circulation was 21,000.

24. *"En plus, on voit donc qu'une solution du problème juif qui viserait à la création d'une colonie juive isolée de l'Europe, n'entrainerait pas, pour la vie littéraire de l'Occident, de conséquences deplorables. Celle-ci perdrait, en tout et pour tout, quelques personnalités de mediocre valeur et continuerait, comme par le passé, à se développer selon ses grandes lois évolutives."* *Le Soir,* March 4, 1941.
25. *"La guerre n'aura fait qu'unir plus étroitement ces deux choses si voisines qu'étaient dès l'origine l'âme hitlerienne et l'âme allemande, jusqu'à en faire une seule et unique puissance. C'est un phénomène important, car il signifie qu'on ne peut juger le fait hitlérien sans juger en même temps le fait allemand et que l'avenir de l'Europe ne peut être prévu que dans le cadre des possibilités et des besoins du génie allemand. Il ne s'agit pas seulement d'une série de réformes, mais de l'émancipation définitive d'un peuple qui se trouve, à son tour, appelé à exercer une hégémonie en Europe."* *Le Soir,* October 28, 1941.
26. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, eds., *Responses on Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (1989) pp. 209, 7, 147, 139; Geoffrey Hartman, "Blindness and Insight," *New Republic* (March 7, 1988), pp. 30–31; Leon Roudiez, "Searching for Achilles' Heel: Paul de Man's Disturbing Youth," *World Literature Today* (Summer 1989), p. 438; Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), p. 257. In 1991 Jameson's book won the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell Prize "for an outstanding literary or linguistic study."
27. Hamacher, Hertz, and Keenan, eds., *Responses on Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism,* pp. 389, 395.
28. Lincoln to James H. Hackett, August 17, 1863, in *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings* (1989), vol. 2, p. 493.
29. Paul A. Cantor, "Shakespeare—'For All Time'?" *Public Interest* 110 (Winter 1993), p. 44.